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AUTHOR Arnold, Stephen E.
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ABSTRACT

Managers and executives need the easy and quick access to business and management information that online databases can provide, but many have difficulty articulating their search needs to an intermediary. One possible solution would be to encourage managers and their immediate support staff members to search textual databases directly as they now use timesharing services and numeric data. Information services companies are inventing systems which mesh more easily with existing executive habits, and terminals are appearing more frequently on managers' desks and in their immediate departments. Electronic mail services are beginning to bridge the gap between decision makers and textual data as they provide online access to current awareness services, bulletin boards, bank stock prices, indexes to current financial opinion and analyses of bank performance, morning stock market comments and news briefs, and the full text of trade publications. Challenges posed by these developments include ease of use, customer support, appropriate databases, copyright concerns in reformatting and reuse, time to search, and the role of information specialists in accelerating these trends. Meeting these challenges in a productive way will require innovative thinking, experimentation, and a willingness to take risks. (DMC)

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DATABASE SEARCHING BY MANAGERS

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Stephen E. Arnold
Vice President
Data Courier, Inc.

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DATABASE SEARCHING BY MANAGERS

Stephen E. Arnold, Data Courier, Inc., U.S.A.

Abstract: As corporate edicts force behavioral changes and new tools are created by information services companies, barriers to database searching by managers are falling. This paper explores trends and challenges emerging from database delivery to managers and executives. It suggests that electronic mail may bridge information users and business databases.

Information specialists, acting as intermediaries between the ultimate users of business and management information and appropriate online databases, face several challenges. One of the most frustrating, according to recent research by Data Courier, Inc., is the persistent difficulty managers have in articulating their search needs.

Typically, it may be necessary to test up to three search strategies before arriving at the targeted results desired by an executive. Such duplication, frustrating to both parties, is inefficient and costly. Moreover, it tends to depreciate, in managers' eyes, the capabilities of both information specialists and online systems.

One possible solution is to encourage managers and their immediate support staff members to search textual databases directly, in the same fashion they now use timesharing services and numeric data.

Barriers to Searching by Managers

This suggestion wins little support from information specialists. Among other negative factors, they cite the following:

- Managers are unwilling to master the complex protocols of bibliographic systems
- Managers would not make sufficiently frequent use of these information sources to maintain searching skills

- Managers do not have terminals at their desks and will not travel to a central terminal location to search textual databases

- Managers don't know how to type and won't learn.

Although one may feel intuitively that this analysis is correct--and it probably is for the majority of managers--recent evidence indicates that direct database searching by managers and executives is occurring in the United States.

Changing Habits and New Tools

Corporate edicts are forcing behavioral change at an unexpectedly rapid pace, and information services companies are inventing systems which mesh more easily with existing executive habits.

- Textual business and management databases are beginning to be delivered on non-bibliographic systems which feature more "user friendly" protocols.

- These systems also provide menus, options and Help commands for simple step-by-step reviews of search skills.

- Terminals are appearing more frequently on managers' desks and in their immediate departments. In a recent study of 500 executives, two-thirds had computer terminals in their work areas and 15 percent used terminals at their own desks.

- Electronic mail is the required medium for internal communications in a growing number of U.S. companies. One industry expert, Stephen Caswell, president of a Canadian consulting firm, estimates that there are over 125,000 computer-based message service mailboxes in the United States, and that 60 to 80 million messages are transmitted annually. Managers in these organizations are being pressured by corporate edict to learn to type.

Integrated Services

Electronic mail, specialized industry services and integrated word processing are opening new direct delivery channels for textual business and management databases. They join Dow Jones, CompuServe, the Source and others in providing a variety of information sources and services to individuals. The traditional bibliographic information services also are promoting the ability to serve individual managers.

Electronic mail is beginning to bridge decision makers and textual data. Dialcom International Inc., for example, now makes available the

ABI/INFORM database to its electronic mail customers--more than 30,000 individuals in 3,000 organizations. According to Christopher Brown, vice president of marketing at Dialcom, ABI/INFORM was added to "let a manager find the information he needs, immediately, right at his own desk."

Among Dialcom's innovations are current awareness services that deliver profile output into an individual's electronic mailbox, where it can be read, scanned, forwarded to others or filed for future reference.

Textual databases also are being included as an integral component of new specialized information services. For example, the Bank Administration Institute recently announced a new service for banking executives. It provides electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, bank stock prices and

- The previous five issues of "The American Banker," a trade publication
- Indexes to current financial opinion and analyses of bank performance
- Morning stock market comments and news briefs.

Word processing, as a tool for document creation, is being supplanted by integrated word processing, a tool for managers which links document creation with electronic filing and retrieval. Hewlett-Packard, for example, offers data processing, word processing, graphics and electronic filing capabilities for its HP 3000 computers. The market is not the traditional data processing department but, through distributed data processing, individual functional managers. Once familiar with electronic text processing, a manager more easily comprehends searching external electronic databases.

The Challenges

These developments promise to heighten awareness of the ready availability of business and management databases, train managers and their support staffs to use textual databases in the context of daily tasks, and ease the workloads of information specialists. They also bring many challenges: to the providers of both systems and databases, to the individuals who use them, and to information specialists who may perceive these developments as threatening rather than beneficial. Among the challenges are:

- Ease of Use. Information services marketed to individuals must feature "user friendly" protocols, online assistance, etc. For new or infrequent users, menu- or option-driven systems ease use. But when greater skill is achieved, menus become handcuffs. Users need to be able to bypass the menu and go directly to command level. Two parallel paths should be provided, one filled with helpful signposts, the other giving direct and unaided access.

- Customer Support. "User friendly" does not capture all that is necessary to support individual users who do not have the benefit of working closely with an information specialist. The whole process must be "naive user friendly." Reference cards, detailed instruction manuals, toll-free customer assistance and immediate reaction to requests for assistance are vital to growth of searching outside the information specialist community.

- Appropriate Databases. Database publishers must design information services that respond to managers' needs. Just as bibliographic online systems generated a need for databases that are not simply the typesetting version of print services, so these new delivery systems will generate needs for databases that are not simply the bibliographic version as delivered on existing systems.

- Reformatting and Reuse. Copyright and other proprietary rights concerns posed by requests from information specialists to download, reformat or reuse information from textual databases have not been resolved. Individual managers and executives will not even raise the question. Their intent is to obtain information and use it in whatever way best suits the requirements of the task. Few will even be aware that copyright questions exist. Database publishers must be prepared to deal with this reaction as textual files become available to end users.

- Who Has Time to Search? A recent Booz, Allen & Hamilton, Inc. study reported than an executive spends the day in these ways: 8 percent reading, 13 percent creating documents, 46 percent in meetings (including telephone), 8 percent analyzing, and 25 percent in "less productive activities." Which of these activities, made more efficient by the new electronic technologies, will provide time to search for business and management information?

- The Role for Information Specialists. Information specialists have an opportunity to accelerate the trends identified in this paper. By adopting an aggressive posture in helping managers make the best use of textual databases--whatever the system on which they are available--information specialists will be perceived as professionals knowledgeable in a much larger sphere. When managers are able to handle simple search questions, information specialists will have more time to work on the complex search topics. With time to do so, they will be able to add value to search results by summarizing and reporting rather than delivering printouts.

Conclusion

Managers and executives need easy and quick access to business and management information. Electronic mail and other new systems are

speeding access to internal information and laying the groundwork for delivery of external textual databases.

Database searching by managers poses many challenges. Meeting them in a productive way will require innovative thinking, experimentation, and a willingness to take risks.